PROPOSED ACTION

Davis Fire Recovery Project

Crescent Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest

The Crescent Ranger District is proposing to salvage harvest on approximately 6,570 acres within the Davis Fire area. Fuels reduction and reforestation within the fire area are also proposed. Timber to be salvaged was killed or severely damaged during the Davis Fire in July 2003. The Davis Fire burned approximately 21,000 acres of National Forest System Lands.

The general location by landmark is 10 miles west of La Pine, Oregon; from the west side of Davis Lake to the south end of Wickiup Reservoir, and south to Hamner Butte. See attached location map. The legal description is: Township 22 South, Range 7 East, Sections 25-27, 34, 35; Township 23 South, Range 7 East, Sections 1-4, 9-16, 22-25; Township 22 South, Range 8 East, Sections 21-29, 31-36; Township 23 South, Range 8 East, Sections 1-12, 16-20, 29, 30, Willamette Meridian.

Purpose and Need

Fire intensity falls into three categories: High (where no needles are left), moderate (where needles are brown), and low (where much of the needles are green and understory is burned). The intensity of the Davis Fire was variable and resulted in a few areas of little or no damage; but the majority of the fire (74%) burned at moderate to high intensities, resulting in nearly complete mortality. These forests will revert to a stand initiation stage.

More than half of the fire occurred within the Davis Late Successional Reserve and about 7,700 acres of that was at high or moderate intensity. The Northwest Forest Plan states "Late Successional Reserves (LSR) are to be managed to protect and enhance conditions of late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystems, which serve as habitat for late-successional and old-growth related species…" (C-11).

The Northwest Forest Plan includes guidelines for salvage that prevent negative effects on late-successional habitat while permitting some commercial wood volume removal, and recognizes that "excessive amounts of coarse woody debris may interfere with stand regeneration activities following some disturbances," and that "salvage may help reduce the risk of future stand-replacing disturbances." (C-13).

The overriding purpose of entering the fire area within the Davis LSR is to facilitate late-successional habitat recovery. Habitat recovery following the catastrophic loss has the following three components:

- **Reforestation and Regeneration**

  Natural regeneration of the conifer species after a fire is dependent on seed dispersal from healthy trees. In many areas, particularly within the interior areas of the fire, adjacent seed sources will not be available. These areas will require reforestation by planting.

  Ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir are the desirable species in most of the project area. Replanting with the appropriate species will ensure timely establishment of species desirable for long-term objectives.

  The lodgepole flat area south of Davis Lake would see natural regeneration over time, but because the area is a Key Elk Area, there is a need to accelerate the rate of reforestation.

- **Fuel Levels and Fire Risk**

  Bringing fuel loads to a level that reduces the likelihood of stand-replacement fire in regenerated stands, particularly during the early stages of stand development, will promote the long-term survival and growth of new conifers.

  The impacts to soils from another fire could be severe with the current amount of dead wood that will become surface fuel. A fire in heavy surface fuels could increase the duration of elevated temperatures during a fire event to levels capable of altering soil properties and affecting site productivity.

- **Management of Newly Established Forest**

  Forest stands within the Davis Fire area were overly dense where they had not been recently managed. The amount and density of burned trees would severely limit active management of regenerated stands. Most of the trees will have fallen by the time regenerated stands will be ready to be thinned. Removing a portion of the dead trees now will facilitate thinning the new stands, which accelerates growth and vigor of the trees.

The remainder of the fire (about 9,000 acres or 45%) occurred in Matrix or Administratively Withdrawn allocations, or was outside the Northwest Forest Plan area in the General Forest Management Area. Fire intensity was high or moderate over about 5,500 acres. The purpose of the salvage in these areas is similar to the purpose of salvage in the LSR, but with more emphasis on recovering the economic value of merchantable timber from trees that were killed or severely damaged. Reduction of fuels left on site would benefit the young stands being established at the next entry of fire. The salvage of merchantable trees in all areas may make the recommended removal of fuels in smaller diameter, unmerchantable size classes economically feasible.

As required by Forest Service Manual (FSM7700), a Roads Analysis is being conducted for the project area. This process involves an interdisciplinary review of the transportation system, including access and travel management. Recommendations resulting from that analysis may be considered in the Environmental Impact Statement. To be involved with the Roads Analysis process, contact Ken Kittrell at the Crescent Ranger District (541) 433-3200.

Proposed Action

Areas identified for salvage (about 6,570 acres) are within high or moderate intensity burn, primarily in stands of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer species. Only dead trees will be removed and the areas of low-intensity burn will not be entered with this proposal. Fuels reduction by removing the smaller dead trees and treating activity fuels by piling and burning and/or chipping, will take place across the project area. Reforestation will take place in the moderate and high intensity burn including plantations present before the fire, activity units proposed for salvage, and the lodgepole flat area south of Davis Lake.

Commercial logging would be conducted by a combination of ground-based tractor, skyline, and helicopter yarding. Dead and severely damaged trees in excess of wildlife habitat and soil protection needs would be salvaged; these generally include trees greater than 12 inches in diameter. A mosaic of retention areas will be left untreated across the fire area, and area closures will be considered as possible mitigation.

Removal of smaller diameter trees (generally less than 12” dbh) may not be accomplished until after commercial salvage operations are completed. Timber harvest residues would be treated with consideration for providing for wildlife habitat and long-term soil productivity. Dead trees (snags) and down wood would be retained in a mosaic of varying densities across the landscape or in accordance with salvage guidelines in the Northwest Forest Plan (C-14).

The proposal may include construction of temporary roads necessary to provide access for salvage operations. Any temporary roads constructed would be obliterated following their use. No new permanent road construction is proposed.

Preliminary Issues Identified

The following is a list of concerns or issues related to the proposed action that the interdisciplinary team has identified. Where issues cannot be resolved through project design or mitigation, they may be the basis for developing alternatives to the Proposed Action.

- *Soil Productivity:* Maintenance of soil productivity is an important objective in the project area. Impacts from the fire, suppression activities, and past management practices have had an effect on the soil resource, and in some areas soils may be sensitive to additional impacts. In addition, future impacts to soils in the event of a re-burn could be severe if fuel loadings are allowed to reach high levels.
- *Water Quality and Fish Habitat:* Odell Creek is listed on the 2002 303(d) list as "Water Quality Limited" by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. Temperatures in Odell Creek exceed the standard set for salmonid rearing and spawning. Proposed activities near Odell Creek must improve the conditions or at least ensure that the conditions are not further degraded. Bull trout, a federally Threatened species, and redband trout, a Regional Sensitive species, also use Odell Creek.
- *Wildlife Habitat:* The Davis Fire burned through a wide variety of habitats providing for American bald eagle, elk, deer, black-backed woodpeckers, northern spotted owl, and more. Habitat for these species needs to be considered in project layout and design.
- *Snags and Down Wood:* The fire created many dead trees. In the short term, this will provide an abundance of snags; however, in the long-term, (two to three decades), snags will be lacking as the current snags fall over.
- *Cultural Resources:* The location and significance of cultural resources will be considered in project design and will require protection of sites and/or mitigation measures where there is a potential for effect on these resources from proposed activities.
- *Insects and Diseases:* Certain insect populations typically increase following a wildfire. Infestations have the potential to become quite large and move beyond the perimeter of the fire, causing a potential risk to the quality of the adjacent owl and eagle habitat.
- *Noxious Weeds:* Potential spread of noxious weeds is a concern across the fire area. They post a threat to native plant communities and wildlife that depend on them and reduce the diversity of plant and animal species. Late Successional Reserve values and Survey and Manage plant populations could be at risk of noxious weed invasion if existing weed populations spread into burned areas adjacent to and within the LSR.
- *Public Access to Fire Area:* The Fire area is currently closed to the public, except along the major roads. The closure reduces stress on big game and the surviving wildlife, and protects sensitive areas. Wildlife, as well as public safety, will be key considerations in determining when and how the public is allowed back into the fire area.
- *Scenic Quality:* Views from Highway 46 (Cascade Lakes National Scenic Byway) and other visually sensitive areas, such as recreation sites have been severely impacted by the fire. Proposed salvage and fuels treatments could further affect forest scenery. Project design will consider reducing negative impacts and enhancing the existing scenic condition where possible.

Timeline

Planning and analysis will take place throughout the fall. It is estimated a draft EIS will be available in early January 2004. A final decision is expected in March 2004.

Management Direction

The following describes land management allocations from the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan and INFISH, for the Davis Fire Project Area.

Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

Old Growth - This management area provides naturally developed old-growth forest ecosystems for (1) habitat for plant and animal species associated with old growth forest ecosystems, (2) representations of landscape ecology, (3) public enjoyment of large, old-tree environments, and (4) the needs of the public from an aesthetic spiritual sense. Old growth areas will also contribute to the biodiversity of the Forest. (Forest Plan, p. 4-149) M15-5: If the structure of an old growth area is significantly altered through a catastrophic event such as a fire, windstorm, or insect epidemic, another stand would be substituted that meets the minimum requirements for the indicator species. The original area could then be salvaged and reforested. An old growth area will be considered significantly altered if it no longer meets the minimum habitat needs for the indicator species.

General Forest - The goal in General Forest is to emphasize timber production while providing forage production, visual quality, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities for public use and enjoyment.

Intensive Recreation – The goal is to provide a wide variety of quality outdoor recreation opportunities within a forest environment where the localized settings may be modified to accommodate large numbers of visitors. Undeveloped recreation opportunities may occur in this Management Area.

Bald Eagle – This area is to be managed for bald eagle habitat to enhance the carrying capacity of the area for bald eagles. Nesting habitat and foraging areas will be protected or enhanced. Suitable nesting sites will be provided on a continuing basis. Old-growth stands with large trees will be emphasized. Human disturbance will be minimal during the nesting season.

Special Interest Area (Davis Lake) – This Management area preserves and provides interpretation of unique geological, biological, and cultural areas for education, scientific, and public enjoyment purposes.

Scenic Views – This management area provides high quality scenery that represents the natural character of Central Oregon.

Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP)

Administratively Withdrawn – These areas are identified in current Forest Plans and include recreation and visual areas, backcountry, and other areas where management emphasis precludes scheduled harvest. In the Davis Fire project area, Administratively Withdrawn corresponds to the Davis Lake Special Interest Area.

Late Successional Reserve (LSR) - Late-successional reserves are to be managed to protect and enhance old-growth forest conditions which serve as habitat for late-successional and old-growth forest related species, including the northern spotted owl. Salvage guidelines prevent negative effects on late-successional habitat, while facilitating habitat recovery. In some cases, salvage may help reduce the risk of future stand-replacing disturbances (C-13).

Matrix - The matrix is the federal land outside the six other categories of areas designated in the Northwest Forest Plan. It is also the area in which most timber harvest and other silvicultural activities will be conducted.

Riparian Reserves – These reserves provide an area along streams, wetlands, ponds, lakes, and unstable or potentially unstable areas where riparian dependent resources receive primary emphasis. They overlay the other Management Allocations.

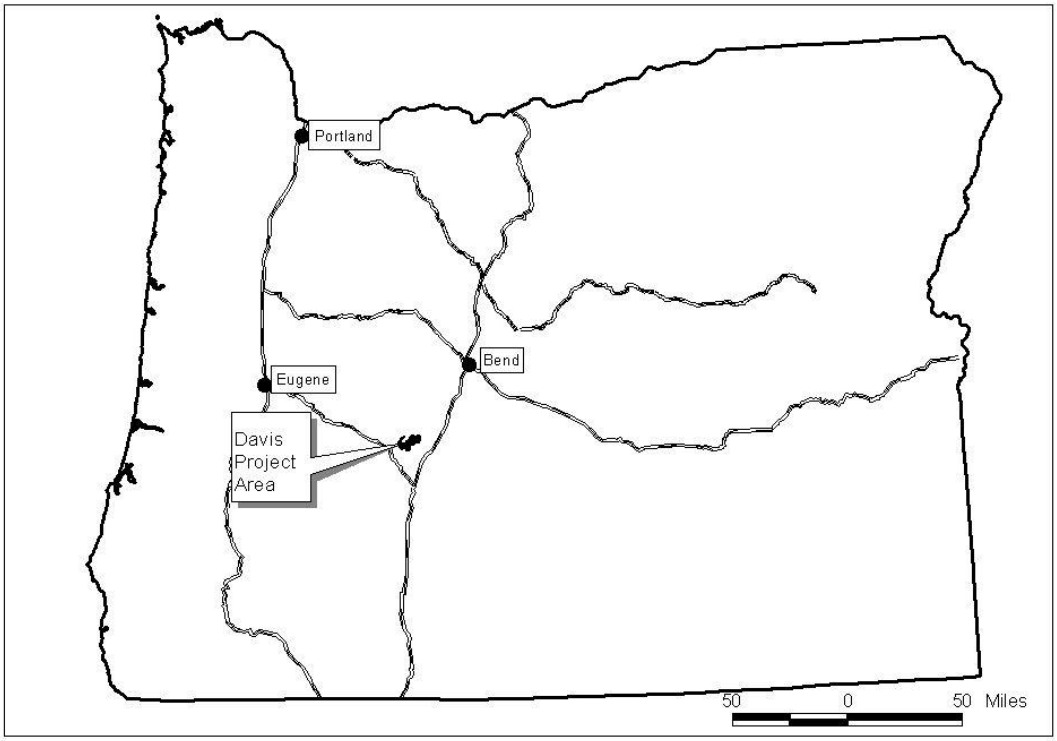
Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH)

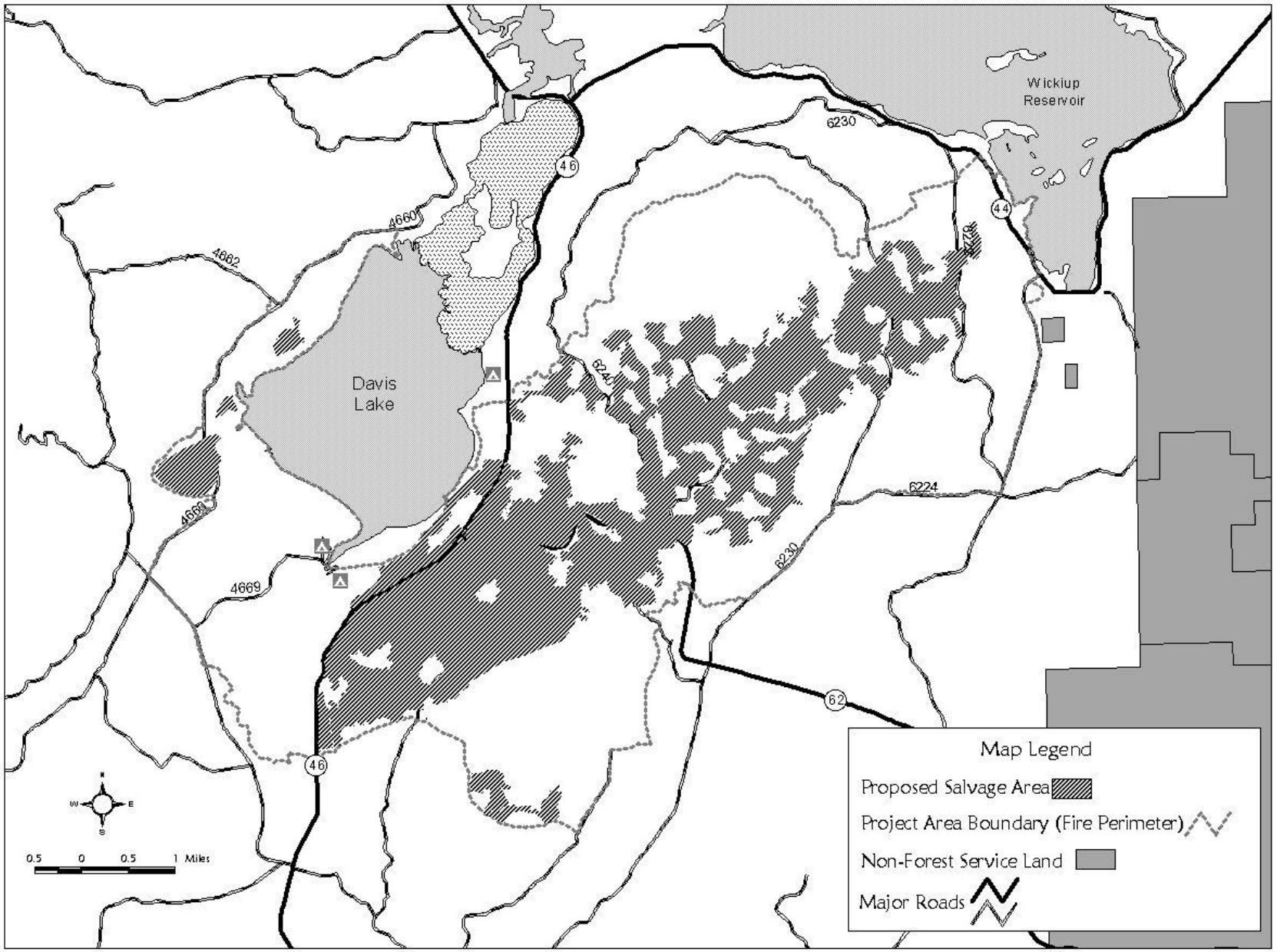
Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) - These are portions of watersheds where riparian-dependent resources receive primary emphasis, and management activities are subject to specific standards and guidelines. RHCAs are outside the Northwest Forest Plan area, and overlap the Forest Plan Management areas. Only small ephemeral draws have been identified in this part of the project area.

Invitation to Comment

An interdisciplinary planning team is developing alternatives to this proposed action based on review and public comment. Comments may be oral or written and would be most helpful if received by September 24, 2003. Please indicate if you would like to attend meetings, field trips, or receive copies of the environmental assessment. If you have concerns about the proposed salvage harvest, reforestation activities, or connected actions, please direct your comments to Phil Cruz, District Ranger, Crescent Ranger District, P.O. Box 208, Crescent, OR 97733. For more information you may also contact Chris Mickle, Environmental Coordinator, at 541-433-3200. Comments may also be submitted through the Deschutes National Forest's website at www.fs.fed.us/centraloregon/index.html.
You will have another opportunity for comment when alternatives have been developed and the Environmental Impact Statement is made available.

Figure 1. Locator Map




Wickiup
Reservoir
Davis
Lake
6230
4660
4662
6240
6224
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Map Legend
Proposed Salvage Area
Project Area Boundary (Fire Perimeter)
Non-Forest Service Land
Major Roads